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ABSTRACT

The use of a communication laboratory to support instruction in higher education is increasing in popularity. While enhancing communication education for majors and non-majors, a "comm lab" also promotes campus awareness and enhances the reputation of the communication department. The communication discipline lends itself to this form of pedagogy, using lectures and discussion to develop students' knowledge of communication, and a laboratory to support attitudinal change and skills development. National Communication Association members were surveyed about the presence of a comm lab on their campuses. Faculty from 10 campuses (Columbus State University, East Tennessee State University, Golden West College, Ithaca College, Luther College, San Jose State University, College of San Mateo, College of William and Mary, Southwest Texas State University, and University of Colorado-Colorado Springs) provided information on their lab-based programs and described the advantages and challenges of having such a lab. Some hints for starting up and running a communication lab include: involve as many communication faculty as possible; involve students in the lab; develop and provide lab-based instructional modules; promote the lab extensively on campus; and document and assess everything. (NKA)

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Communication labs enhance student learning and promote awareness of the discipline

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

By Sherwyn P. Morreale

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The use of a laboratory—a comm lab—to support communication instruction in higher education is increasing in popularity. While enhancing communication education for majors and non-majors, a comm lab also promotes campus awareness and enhances the reputation of the communication department. The communication discipline lends itself well to this form of pedagogy, using lectures and discussion to develop students' knowledge of communication, and a laboratory to support attitudinal change and skills development.

Recently, the National Office surveyed NCA members about the presence of a comm lab on their campus. Faculty members from ten campuses provided information on lab-based programs and described the advantages, as well as the challenges, of having a comm lab.

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Lab Programs and Activities

The purpose of most of the labs is to provide direct support to communication curricula and courses. Courses that are lab-supported include: public speaking, basic/fundamentals, interpersonal communication, small group communication, and debate. One lab provides instruction in using multimedia in organizational communication. Students in a lab-based course are required or recommended to visit the lab and engage in activities to enhance their learning experience in the course.

In addition to supporting communication courses, several labs provide services to other academic or administrative units on their campuses, such as communication workshops or trainings. Those services may be offered as part of a communication across-the-curriculum program, designed to benefit the entire campus.

Undergraduate students working as peer tutors, or graduate students fulfilling their obligations as graduate teaching assistants, staff most of the labs. Communication faculty members develop lab programs and activities and provide orientation and training to student staff members. Some labs enjoy the benefit of full-time lab directors, as well.

The labs use a variety of pedagogical methods to deliver their services:

- Videotape and playback equipment is frequently used to help students improve in oral performance, particularly public speaking, but also interpersonal and small group communication.
- Individual assistance, coaching, and training are provided to students regarding communication skills like speaking, listening, interviewing, speech preparation, outlining, Internet research skills, and use of presentational software like PowerPoint.

- Communication workshops on many different topics are frequently offered by lab staff and publicized campus wide.
- Self-paced interactive instructional modules are available in some of the labs that have been developed specifically for the lab.
- Communication resources such as books, videotapes, and audiotapes are available in labs.
- Assessment of students' oral competence and communication skills takes place in some labs, using students as trained evaluators or computerized software programs.

Advantages of a Comm Lab

According to a majority of the lab directors, a comm lab enhances student learning by serving as a resource for all students, regardless of discipline, who need individual assistance with any communication skill or problem. That assistance is particularly needed on campuses where a basic communication course is not offered, or in states where communication education doesn't occur in the K-12 system.

According to the lab directors, students using a lab can reduce communication anxiety and experience an increase in self-confidence and marketability in the workplace. A comm lab is beneficial to non-native speakers and students of diverse backgrounds; plus, it acts as a campus home for undergraduates and a training ground for graduate teaching assistants.

Faculty members also benefit from the presence of a comm lab on campus. Communication faculty gain class time to work on other concepts because students can develop some skills in the lab. Instructors of non-communication courses can include a

communication assignment in their classes and benefit from lab support of that assignment. A lab also allows faculty an opportunity to incorporate and use various communication technologies in their courses, such as PowerPoint.

Communication departments benefit because lab programs build bridges and increase awareness on the campus of the discipline and its content. A lab also can provide assessment data for the department's accountability and review processes. One of the lab directors said it well: "Comm labs allow us to practice what we teach and preach!"

Challenges

Despite the rosy picture painted by lab directors, they have experienced start-up problems related to seminal funding for the labs and finding and implementing the right programmatic resources. Other challenges the directors reported include:

- Maintaining and improving the lab despite fiscal constraints, limited personnel, and staffing concerns.
- Getting technical support to maintain and improve the lab facility and its technological tools.
- Conducting staff training to maintain quality programs and activities.
- Learning how to teach in a lab rather than a regular classroom and effectively sequencing learning activities.
- Promoting student use and motivating students to use the lab voluntarily.

Schools with Communication Laboratories

The following schools currently have comm labs and have been generous in sharing their insights and experiences with the National Office: Columbus State University, East Tennessee State University, Golden West College, Ithaca College, Luther College, San Jose State University, College of San Mateo, the College of William & Mary, Southwest Texas State University, and University of Colorado, Colorado Springs.

The above mentioned schools have been included on an NCA e-mail listserv (commlab@natcom.org) for the purpose of discussing comm labs. If you would like to subscribe to the commlab listserv, please send an e-mail message to listserv@natcom.org. Leave the subject line blank, and write the following code in the message field using your name and e-mail address: Add commlab "your name" <your e-mail address> quit.

If you have any trouble subscribing yourself, please contact Jennifer Peltak in the National Office at jpeltak@natcom.org.

Hints for Starting Up and Running a Communication Laboratory

1. Involve as many communication department faculty members as possible. When the lab's programs are in development, invite department members to contribute their expertise. Once the lab is up and running, ask faculty to present lab workshops, recruit student helpers, and promote the lab programs. Encourage communication faculty to incorporate lab-based activities in their courses. Don't let the lab operate separately from the department.

2. Involve faculty and administrators from across the campus. Build campus-wide support for the program by asking the campus community how the lab can help them. Provide programs and activities of value to all departments and use the lab to support communication in the campus' general education goals.

3. Involve students in the lab. Recruit upper division communication majors to act as peer tutors, perhaps for independent study credit. Involve graduate students and teaching assistants in administrative and programmatic roles.

4. Develop and provide lab-based instructional modules. Prepare self-paced and other instructional modules and workshop materials for the lab, based on identified needs of the campus community.

5. Promote the lab and its programs extensively on campus. Regularly publicize the lab's resources and programs on the entire campus.

6. Provide training and support for lab staff. Develop and deliver orientations and trainings on a regular basis for all lab staff. Meet regularly with staff to ensure quality of services and programs.

7. Document and assess everything. Track and evaluate student achievement of lab assignments. Record student attendance and participation in lab activities. Evaluate student and faculty perceptions of lab activities and offerings. Use results to support the department's contribution to campus life.